

The Abolition of Slavery

Two hundred years ago to this very day, Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act of 1807 which brought to an end the involvement of Britain in the trafficking of people from Africa to the New World to be sold as slaves. As Britain was the foremost trader of slaves – 3 million were shipped to the plantations before abolition – it was a momentous occasion and rightly heralded as a blow for freedom and human dignity. The abolitionists became heroes of their time and we still remember William Wilberforce as one of the great Christian men of his age. Today then we commemorate that great day in the life of our nation when after almost a century of campaigning, the act to outlaw the slave trade was passed. But note that we can only commemorate such a day and not celebrate – and the reason for this is that there is little for us as a nation to celebrate. And it is wise for us to realise that we still have much to learn and achieve if freedom for all people in the world is to be won.

Why no celebration? Because when we reflect upon the history of the slave trade our nation and indeed our church does not appear in a very good light (to put it mildly). And like so many illiberal and debasing positions held by so called Christian people, their stance in support of slavery came from a misguided reading of the Bible. From the story of Noah they argued that the black people of the world were so inferior that they could be treated as trading items and not human beings and from the letters of St. Paul they were convinced that slavery was simply part of the fabric of the world that God had made. Whether the people of Britain in the 17th century truly believed this or whether they simply used these spurious arguments to enable them to continue to make great wealth from the trade is difficult to tell – but it is a fact that much of the wealth of our nation came from the profits of a trade that took manufactured goods to Africa – slaves to West Indies – and sugar and cotton back to Britain. Cities like Liverpool became highly prosperous – indeed at one point in the 18th century Liverpool was the richest city in Europe – and all on the back of the misery and obscenity of the slave trade. It is salutary to think that in part we owe the prosperity of our nation today to those who were bought and sold into slavery.

And I am afraid to say that the Church of England during this period does not have much to be proud of. It was very slow to change its mind on slavery – in a few moments we will sing the hymn “Amazing Grace” – written by a man called John Newton who was a young captain on a slave ship. He had a conversion to Christianity and ended up being a fervent abolitionist – but that took a great number of years – and in the meantime he thought nothing odd at the start of his journeys in putting his Africans in the thumbscrews before settling down to pray for a safe and profitable passage to the Americas. It was only later in the late 18th century that Newton whole attitude shifted, he became a supporter of the abolitionist cause, deeply regretted his past and was ordained in the Church of England.

Out in Barbados, the Church of England’s own missionary society – the elaborately named Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts – had owned its own plantation since 1710. The plantation was managed like any other one - slaves were owned by the society and had the very word “society” branded on their backs with red-hot irons. When the emancipation of slaves did eventually come in the West Indies – and that did not happen until 30 years after the slave trade act was passed –

compensation was not paid to the slaves but to their owners. In one case the Bishop of Exeter and three colleagues were paid nearly £13,000 in compensation for 665 slaves.

The history of the slave trade is not something that we can be proud of – both as a church or of a nation – and so you can see why we need to commemorate this occasion – there is little to celebrate. Indeed our own Archbishop said recently that an apology was necessary. He said this: the Body of Christ is not just a body that exists at any one time, it exists across history and therefore we share the shame and the sinfulness of our predecessors and part of what we can do, with them and for them in the Body of Christ, is prayer for the acknowledgement of the failure that is part of us not just of some distant “them”.

So today we pray to God for his forgiveness in the part we have played in the enslavement and de-humanising of others – a travesty of his creation - and reach out to those whose ancestors were victims of the slave trade to ask for their forgiveness too. But our prayers – and indeed our action – must be also be directed towards those people who today are enslaved : for slavery has not ended and I am sure we have all read and seen the dreadful stories from around the world of people, more than not children, who are sold into different forms of slavery – working in factories for hours upon end – being forced on to the sex market – manipulated by unscrupulous and wicked masters to work in fearful and unhealthy conditions.

We pray then that we who have been graced by the gift of freedom may use this precious gift to give voice to all who are enslaved by poverty or persecution, held captive by discrimination or disease. May we have the courage to fight against the injustices of our world that cause the conditions in which slavery grows and to bring forward that time when all people under the sun may be set free and live in the glorious liberty of the children of God.

So in recognition of our need for repentance and in response to the challenge to work for the freedom of all God’s people, let us now stand and sing the hymn of that “old African blasphemer” as John Newton called himself – the hymn Amazing Grace.